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ABSTRACT

This paper describes research which involved (1) the study of children's moral reasoning about their own spontaneous prosocial behavior and (2) an examination of the early development of such reasoning. Prosocial moral reasoning is defined as reasoning about conflicts in which the individual must choose between satisfying his or her own wants, needs and desires and those of others in contexts in which laws, punishment, authorities and formal obligations are irrelevant or deemphasized. Twenty-two nursery school children, from 48 to 63 months of age, were observed and questioned by a familiar experimenter, in the classroom setting, about their spontaneous helping, sharing and comforting behaviors over a 12-week period (approximately 4 hours per week). The children justified their prosocial behaviors primarily with references to others' needs and pragmatic considerations. In contrast to the findings of previous research, on prohibition-oriented reasoning, the children used little punishment and authority-oriented or hedonistic reasoning. No sex or age differences were found. (Author/BF)

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Children's Moral Reasoning about Their Own Spontaneous Prosocial Behavior[1]

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was twofold: 1) to study children's moral reasoning about their own spontaneous prosocial behavior (rather than hypothetical story dilemmas), and 2) to examine the very early development of prosccial moral reasoning (reasoning about conflicts in which the individual must choose between satisfying his or her own wants, needs, and or desires and those of others in contexts in which laws, punishment, authorities, and formal obligations are irrelevant or deemphasized.) Twenty-two 48 to 63 months old preschoolers were observed and questioned by a familiar experimenter about their spontaneous helping, sharing, or comforting behaviors over a twelve week period. The children justified their prosocial behaviors primarily with references to others' needs and pragmatic considerations. In contrast to the findings of previous research on prohibition oriented reasoning, the children used little punishment and authority oriented or hedonistic reasoning. There were no sex or age differences in the children's moral reasoning.

Kohlberg's theory on moral judgment has stimulated much research on the topic. Most of this research shares the following three characteristics: 1) the subjects' level of moral judgment has been assessed by eliciting reasoning about hypothetical story situations, not about real behavior; 2) the story dilemmas that have been used are primarily prohibition oriented in content, i.e., deal with conflicts involving laws, rules, authorities, and formal obligations; and 3) the subjects in most of the studies have been elementary school age or older. Thus, since most of the theory and empirical data on the development of moral judgment has been generated with the use of prohibition oriented dilemmas--and hypothetical prohibition oriented dilemmas at that--the applicability of these empirical findings and theory to real life moral conflicts is questionable. Furthermore, we know little about the earliest development of moral judgment.

The purpose of the present study was twofold. First, this research was designed to study children's moral reasoning about their own, spontaneous prosocial behavior. Children's reasoning about hypothetical story situations may not be analogous to reasoning about behaviors that have actually occurred. For example, hypothetical story situations may tend to elicit types of reasoning that children seldom use to justify their own behavior. Thus, research on children's reasoning about their own spontaneous behaviors should provide valuable insight into children's early moral conceptions and the types of motivations that may underlie their own moral behaviors.

The second purpose of this study was to examine the very early development of a nonprohibition oriented domain of moral judgment, that of prosocial moral reasoning, i.e., reasoning about conflicts in which the individual must choose between satisfying his or her own wants, needs, and/or desires and those of others in contexts in which

laws, punishment, authorities, and formal obligations are irrelevant or deemphasized. The limited research on prosocial moral judgment suggests that empirical findings on the development of prohibition moral judgment may not be applicable to the development of prosocial moral reasoning. For example, (name deleted, Note 1) found that elementary school subjects used virtually none of Kohlberg's stage 1 punishment and authority oriented reasoning in their prosocial moral judgment. Furthermore, the second graders in this study did use considerable amounts of stereotyped moral reasoning, a type of reasoning that Kohlberg included in his stage 3, the modal stage of reasoning at about age 13 (Kohlberg, 1969). Unfortunately, since the study did not include children younger than age seven, it was not possible to determine if children's prosocial moral judgment is different from their prohibition reasoning or merely more advanced. Examination of preschoolers' moral judgment should help clarify the nature of child's early prosocial reasoning.

Method

Subjects. The participants in this study were 26 children (16 males and 10 females) 48 to 63 months of age attending one of two classes at a university sponsored nursery school program. The children came primarily from white, middle and upper middle class homes, with the majority of the families having no academic affiliation with the university. Children in the classes who did not speak English (N = 1) or who were known to be retarded or emotionally disturbed (N = 3) were excluded from the study, as was one three year old child.

Procedure. The children in this study were observed and questioned by one female adult experimenter for approximately four hours a week over a twelve week period. Prior to the twelve week period of data collection, the experimenter attended the children's classes for two

weeks, four hours a week, for the purpose of giving the children an opportunity to become familiar with the experimenter.

Throughout the twelve week observation period, the experimenter attended each of the children's two classes for one hour a day, twice a week. During this time she would move around the classroom and playground, looking for spontaneous indidents of helping, sharing or comforting, i.e., instances of prosocial behavior that were not prompted by an adult. When the experimenter did observe one child assist another, she approached the child who initiated the helping act and tried to elicit his or her reasoning about the helpful behavior, This was done with questions such as "Why did you do that?", "How come you gave that to John?", and other analogous questions designed to elicit the child's reasoning about his or her behavior. If the child's response was vague or uncomprehensible, the experimenter tried to question the child further, although such attempts were not always successful.

Results

During the twelve week observation period, sixty-five incidents of prosocial behavior were noted by the experimenter. Of these sixty-five incidents, five involved comforting or the giving of psychological aid, 34 were incidents of sharing, and 26 were acts providing physical help or assistance (exact interrater agreement on the categories of sharing, helping, and comforting was 95%). Twenty-two of the 26 children (14 males and 8 females) initiated at least one prosocial act; the maximum number of prosocial behaviors was nine; the median number of prosocial acts per child was between 2 and 3. The children generally used a variety of types of reasoning if they initiated several prosocial acts. Two of the four children who were never observed being helpful were frequently absent from class.

The children's reasoning about the sixty-five incidents of prosocial behavior were coded into eleven categories; these categories represented the various types of reasoning used by young children in previous research on prosocial and prohibition moral judgment (name deleted, Note 1; Kohlberg, 1969.)

1) Orientation to punishment and authority: the child justifies prosocial behavior with references to the demands of authorities and/or punishment for lack of prosocial behavior, e.g., "The teacher would punish me if I didn't help."

2) Hedonistic orientation: the child justifies assisting another person with references to the expectation of some hedonistic gain resulting from the prosocial act, e.g., "I helped because I wanted someone to play this game with."

3) Orientation to mutual gain: the child justifies acts of assistance with references to resultant gain for both the benefactor and the recipient of aid, e.g., "If I help him, we can both get done and go outside to swing together."

4) Affectional relationship orientation: The child justifies assistance of another with references to the relationship between the child himself and the recipient of aid, e.g., the child helps another person because he or she is "a friend."

5) Approval and interpersonal orientation: the child assists another because he or she expects his or her helpfulness to elicit social approval and/or enhance interpersonal interactions, e.g., "People like you more if you help."

6) Stereotyped perception of good and bad persons: the child justifies his or her helpfulness with stereotyped reasons s such as "it's good to help."

7) Stereotype of natural or majority behavior: the child justifies his prosocial behavior by saying that such behavior is natural and/or that anyone would assist in the given situation.

8) Needs of others orientation: the child refers to another's psychological or physical needs as a justification for his or her prosocial action, e.g., "He needed some glue." and "He wanted the bike."

9) Pragmatic orientation: the child justifies his or her assistance with practical, nonmoral reasons, e.g., "I tied his shoe because I know how to do it."

10) "Wanted to" orientation: the child justifies his or her prosocial behavior with verbalizations analogous to "I wanted to."

11) Unclassifiable.

Reasoning elicited in each of the sixty-five incidents was coded by two investigators. Eighty different statements were coded; more than one type of reasoning was often used in a given situation. Exact agreement on the coding of the incidents was obtained 91% of the time. Percent of exact agreement for each of the individual moral reasoning categories used to code the eighty different statements was as follows: Punishment and authority (no incidence); hedonism, 100%; mutual gain, 100%; affectional relationship orientation, 87%; approval and interpersonal orientation, 50% (1 out of 2 incidents); stereotyped perception of good and bad persons, 100%; stereotype of natural or majority behavior (no use of this category); needs of others orientation, 100%; pragmatic orientation, 79%; unclassifiable, 100%.

Because some subjects verbalized more than one type of moral reasoning, each subject was assigned nine percetile scores, one for each

of the nine types of moral reasoning used by the children. For example, if a child gave five different reasons for his or her prosocial behaviors--one hedonistic, one pragmatic, and three oriented toward the needs of others--the child received a score of 20% for "hedonistic orientation," "20% for pragmatic orientation," and 60% for "needs of others orientation," and 0% for the other remaining types of reasoning not used by the child. If a child justified his or her behavior with only one type of reasoning, the child was assigned a score of 100% for the category encompassing that particular type of reasoning.

Once this procedure was completed, the males' mean percentile scores for each of the moral categories were compared with the analogous females' mean percentile scores. There were no significant differences between the sexes for any of the moral reasoning categories. Thus, the sexes were combined for further analyses. Then the subjects were divided into two groups on the basis of age--those 48 to 54 months of age (5 males and 6 females) and those 55 to 63 months of age (9 males and 2 females). The mean percentile scores for each of the moral reasoning categories for each of the two age groups may be seen in Table 1. Statistics testing the difference between two independent proportions revealed no significant differences between the two age groups.

Insert Table 1 about here

Examination of Table 1 demonstrates that four and five year old children most frequently explained their own prosocial behavior with references about the needs of others and pragmatic considerations. References to mutual benefits ("orientation to mutual gain"), friendship ("affectional relationship orientation"), and the fact that the

benefactor wanted to help or share ("wanted to orientation") were also common justifications for prosocial behavior. None of the preschoolers exhibited any of Kohlberg's stage 1 authority and punishment reasoning. Stereotypes of good or bad persons were seldom verbalized; nor were references to hedonistic considerations ("hedonistic orientation") or approval (approval and interpersonal orientation") frequently mentioned.

Discussion

The data from this study support the previous research findings suggesting that the early development of prosocial moral judgment differs from the development of prohibition moral judgment. The preschoolers used none of Kohlberg's stage 1 punishment and authority oriented reasoning in their prosocial moral judgment. Since stage 1 reasoning is infrequent in four and five year olds (this study) and elementary school children's (name deleted, Note 1)moral reasoning, it is probable that punishment and authority oriented reasoning is never salient in children's prosocial moral judgment.

Although the data in this study suggest that children do not use power and authority oriented reasoning to justify their spontaneous prosocial behavior, they may use such reasoning to explain acts of helpfulness that are actually acts of compliance with adults' commands. Indeed, there were a couple of incidents during the twelve week observation period when children said that they helped or shared merely because they were told to do so, e.g., "Well, I didn't want to (share the glue), but the teacher made me." These incidents were not considered spontaneous acts of assistance because they were initiated by adult commands.

The children in this study did verbalize much pragmatic and needs-related reasoning. The meaning of children's needs oriented

reasoning is not entirely clear. Kohlberg (in his 1975 codebook) claimed that reference to another's needs when the other's needs do not conflict with one's own needs or desires is a type of pragmatic, stage 2 reasoning. He did not specifically discuss concern with others' needs when the other's needs conflict with one's own needs. However, previous research on prosocial moral judgment (name deleted, 1976) indicated that concern with others' needs when the others' needs conflict with one's own needs (has a cost to the benefactor) intercorrelates and clusters in a factor analysis with empathic, sympathetic moral reasoning. Furthermore, concern with others' needs when these needs conflict with one's own needs was unrelated to or negatively correlated with hedonistic reasoning a type of reasoning included in Kohlberg's pragmatic, hedonistic stage 2. Thus, it is probable that many of children's references to other's needs when justifying sharing and helping behaviors imply a primitive empathic orientation. Such a sympathetic concern was often conveyed to the observer via the children's nonverbal behavior. Therefore, since Kohlberg includes empathic moral reasoning in his stage 3 (the model stage at age 13), young children seem to assist others for empathic reasons long before research on prohibition moral reasoning would suggest.

Hedonistic reasoning is common in both the prosocial and prohibition oriented moral judgment of elementary school children (name deleted, Note 1; Kohlberg, 1969); thus the limited use of such reasoning in this study is somewhat surprising. It is probable, however, that children's references to mutual gain are often largely based on hedonistic motivations. Furthermore, when children justify prosocial behaviors with the statement "I wanted to," they may often mean that they acted for selfish reasons, i.e., because of their own wants.

(It is also possible, however, that the children used the reason "I wanted to" when they could not or would not explain their motivations.) Finally, the children in this study may have used little hedonistic reasoning because they were discussing reasoning for helping or sharing, not reasons for refusing to help. Previous research has demonstrated that children use hedonistic reasoning to justify the refusal to help more often than to explain the decision to assist (name deleted, Note 1).

The preschoolers in this study used minimal amounts of stereotyped and approval oriented moral reasoning. Since (name deleted, Note 1) found that these types of reasoning were common in elementary school children's prosocial moral judgment, it is likely that children begin to reason in stereotypic and approval oriented ways between the ages of five and seven.

Research on role taking suggests that adults often attribute different motivations to an actor depending on who the actor is--the individual himself or someone else (e.g., Jones and Nisbett, 1971). Important differences may also exist between children's reasoning about their own moral behavior and their reasoning about the actions of others (see, for example, Keasey, 1977). Therefore, more research is needed to determine the effect of role of the actor (observer or the individual himself) on children's moral judgment. Furthermore, since there is virtually no research on preschooler's prosocial moral reasoning about hypothetical story dilemmas, such research is needed to delineate similarities and differences between preschoolers' prosocial moral reasoning about hypothetical story situations and reasoning concerning real life moral conflicts.

Reference Notes

1. (Name deleted) The development of prosocial moral reasoning. Paper presented at the biannual meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, 1977.

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Table 1

Mean Percentages of Use of the Prosocial Moral Reasoning Categories

Age	Categories of Reasoning								
	Hedonistic	Mutual Benefit	Affectional Relationship	Approval and Interpersonal	Stereotype Good/Bad	Needs of Others	Pragmatic	"Want to"	Unclassifiable
48-54 months (N =11)	4.52	18.18	9.09	0	0	22.73	24.25	18.94	2.27
55-63 months (N =11)	3.19	10.40	10.01	9.84	2.27	26.25	24.78	12.13	1.14
48-63 months (N =22)	3.86	14.29	10.00	4.92	1.13	24.49	24.51	15.53	1.70